

leaned back and closed his eyes and said, "Man, it's hot, wonder when it's gonna break?" Clete laid his clarinet across his lap and wiped his wet forehead with a bare hand and said, "Never."

Ruth, lounging on the couch and stroking her sleeping son's damp back, hummed Gershwin's 'Summertime' softly and slowly.

Outside the sun blazed in mid-sky. Heat shimmered off the surface of the lagoon, and back in the hills behind the city a scrawny coyote died under a dried up old pepper tree.

WATER, Part 2

The Augua Hedionda Lagoon was, before the temperature change, an acre of murky, scum-covered water nestled between Loma Alta's stinking sewage treatment plant and a poorly maintained (brown grass, bent and rusted basketball hoops) beach-side park. When the ice caps melted, the lagoon grew, filling the little valley of the dribbling creek that fed it to become an immense turquoise sea that jutted five miles inland and measured a mile and a half across — north to south — at its widest point.

As the lagoon swelled — with unexpected swiftness (it rose to its highest level in just under a week) — it swallowed up the low-lying trailer parks and mini-malls and grocery stores and gas stations and K-Marts that had sprouted along the city's main east/west corridor — Loma Alta Boulevard — and leveled off, and the whales that usually traveled further down the coast to Baja California's more secluded inlets to have their calves began arriving.

And Ellis Leahy, whose tract house lot had been carved out of a hillside in the back end of the formerly parched valley, now had waterfront property: gentle waves lapped at the bank inches below his back yard, and he pulled out the fence and he and his wife Ruth would sit at sunset and dangle their feet in the water's cool comfort and watch the spouting leviathans frolic a mere hundred yards from their back door.

And the real estate agents, banking nervously on the stabilization of the sea level (some experts said yes, some experts said no), crawled over the neighborhood like cockroaches, offering huge prices for the fortuitously located houses.

But Ellis was holding out; he and his next door neighbor Clete Johnson had an inflatable raft, scuba gear, and a plan: there were valuables down there in the submerged houses and stores, money and jewelry and the like, and the "Leahy & Johnson Salvage Company" sounded like an idea whose time had come.

DINNER

Ellis and his next door neighbor Clete have been able to catch dinner in the new lagoon behind their houses. They hook ocean fish — bonita, perch, yellowtail, sea bass — and clean them up right there in their back yards. They use serrated fishing knives to excise the lumpy tumors and the oozing lesions that have been showing up on the fish with increasing regularity. Clete slices away a tainted chunk of flesh, points to the sky with his knife and says, "It's the sun fuckin' 'em up; ozone's shot to hell." Ellis casts his line out and says, "Either that or the chemicals." Clete nods and re-baits his hook. "Yeah," he says. "All sorts of shit got covered up when that water rose."

They barbeque their catches, taking turns on each others' outdoor grills to save on briquets. Ginger, Clete's wife's little chihuahua, hangs around when they cook at Clete's house. The smell of searing flesh brings out the neighbors too. "Catch somethin' good today, guys?" they ask hopefully, and "What kinda bait you boys usin'?" But Clete and Ellis aren't big on invites. "Let 'em eat steak," Clete says.

Ginger, when no cooked morsels fall her way, sniffs out to the shore in search of stray pieces of hacked-off tumors or discarded guts that might have washed back up onto the lawn.

SHAMU BLUES

Ruth and Ellis Leahy hired a baby-sitter for little Roy so they could go out and watch a movie. "There's coke in the refrigerator and microwave popcorn in the kitchen cabinet, Donna," Ruth said on her way out the door. "C'mon, Ruth, God damn it," Ellis called to her from the porch. "We're gonna be late." "Keep your damned pants on, Ellis," Ruth replied, and then she said to Donna, "And please, honey, stay away from that lagoon. There's rumors goin' around that it's not safe anymore."